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## **Finding – and Failing to Find – Meaning in Nature**

### **Abstract**

This paper is about how we should evaluate our tendencies to find – or fail to find – different meanings in the natural world. It has three aims: (1) to show that some virtues and vices can be exhibited in our tendencies to find or to overlook the meanings of natural things, even if it is unclear whether any can only be exhibited in our relations with such things; (2) to categorise some of the relevant virtues and vices; and (3) to refute the objection that meaning-focused approaches to environmental philosophy, of the sort adopted by writers such as Alan Holland and myself, cannot adequately account for nature's independence from human concerns.

Keywords: nature, virtue theory, meaning, anthropocentrism, aesthetics

## **Finding – and Failing to Find – Meaning in Nature**

We are disposed to find many different meanings, and many different kinds of meaning, in nature. But it is often unclear how, and on what grounds, these dispositions should be evaluated. Was Ruskin right to disparage those poets for whom ‘the primrose is anything else than a primrose: a star, or a sun, or a fairy’s shield, or a forsaken maiden’? If he was, on what grounds are such individuals to be condemned? Should a person be praised for her disposition to see the natural world as a repository of religious symbols? Or was Lynn White correct to claim that such a tendency can foster a ‘human egoism’ that the virtuous will seek to avoid? If, as the nature writer Richard Mabey suggests, our vision of nature’s meanings has become ‘narrower’, is this a cause for regret?<sup>1</sup>

This is a hotchpotch of questions, and even if they were more precisely formulated, it would be too ambitious to try to address all of them in a single paper. But here I have the more modest aim of showing that what might seem a hopelessly tangled bundle of issues can be partly untangled by adopting an aretaic or virtue-focused approach. My first aim is to show that some virtues and vices can be exhibited in our tendencies to find or to overlook the meanings of natural things, even if it is unclear whether any can *only* be exhibited in our relations with such things. My second is to categorise some of the relevant traits. This is no small task of course, and not just because ‘meaning’ and ‘the natural world’ are such ambiguous terms. But matters are simpler than they might at first seem, for – as I try to show – many of our dispositions to find - or fail to find - meaning in the natural world can be evaluated in terms of a surprisingly simple aretaic schema. On the one hand, there are various tendencies to find what might be described as the ‘wrong’ meanings in the natural world. These traits, of which anthropomorphic sentimentalism provides one example, evince what I call ‘prejudice’. On the other hand, there are a range of ‘myopic’ dispositions to overlook the

meanings of nature and natural things. These tendencies, the ‘prejudicial’ and the ‘myopic’, can, I propose, be counteracted through the exercise of two virtues - ‘attention’ and ‘receptivity’, respectively. To illustrate what it means to be attentive and receptive in the relevant senses, I look to examples from the genre of ‘nature writing’ – in particular, the works of Richard Mabey.

My third aim is to respond to the objection that meaning-focused approaches to environmental philosophy are inherently and perniciously anthropocentric, and therefore unable adequately to account for the ‘otherness’ of the natural world. In response, I argue that such approaches are not inherently human-centred in any sense that need perturb environmental thinkers. Nonetheless, I concede that it would be perniciously anthropocentric to become *preoccupied* with identifying the various meanings the natural world has for us.

The antidote for this sort of anthropocentrism can, I propose, be found in the exercise of attention. For, in many cases, the best advice to give someone who has become fixated on nature’s various meanings is simply to pay more attention to natural things. Thus I suggest that attention does not just counteract sentimentalism, superstition and other manifestations of prejudice. It can also militate against the anthropocentric tendency to overlook nature’s independence from human concerns.

## **1. Clarifications**

I begin with some clarifications – of ‘nature’, ‘meaning’ and ‘nature’s meanings’, respectively.

With regard to the first of these, my aim is not to provide a definition, but merely to give readers a general sense of how the terms ‘nature’ and ‘the natural world’ will be used in what follows.<sup>2</sup> Briefly stated, I will use those terms to denote what is usually thought to

constitute the subject matter of natural history. So, for the purposes of this paper, a thing only counts as natural if one can reasonably imagine it as the main subject of a natural history book or television programme. Badgers, bracket fungi and deciduous woodlands are, so to speak, in; laptop computers, internal combustion engines and public swimming pools are out.<sup>3</sup>

Two further clarifications. First, these references to what is natural should not lead one to suppose that a thing only counts as natural if it has been entirely unaffected by human beings. On that definition, very few parts of the biosphere – perhaps, if Bill McKibben (1990) is correct, none – would qualify as such. On the contrary, just as natural history books or television programmes often focus on environments such as gardens or hedgerows which have been deliberately and substantially shaped by human actions, so, for the purposes of this paper, these sorts of things will count as natural.

Second, in referring to natural things, ‘thing’ is to be interpreted broadly. For when people speak or write about the natural world, in the sense given above, they often mean to refer not just to certain entities but to a range of other ontological categories – events, processes, kinds of entities and so forth. Indeed, in speaking and writing of the natural world, people sometimes mean not this or that thing or this or that event, but the natural world as a whole, the biosphere. There is ontological complexity here; nonetheless, for the sake of simplicity, I will continue to refer to ‘nature and natural things’, on the understanding that this phrase is taken to mean, not just certain material objects, but the various events, processes, etc. that are typically thought to constitute the natural world, in the sense indicated above.

With regard to the second of our three key terms – ‘meaning’ – it is not my intention to defend a theory of meaning on a par with those that have been developed by writers such as Paul Horwich and Robert Brandom. For our purposes it will suffice to consider how the

term ‘meaning’ and its cognates are used in everyday discourse. It will be enough, that is, to work with what David E. Cooper calls an ‘account of meaning in general’ (2003: 10).

To do this, moreover, I draw on Cooper’s own work.<sup>4</sup> Taking his cue from one of Wittgenstein’s remarks,<sup>5</sup> Cooper proposes that if we are to understand what meaning means, then we should consider what it is to *explain* the meaning of something. To do this, he suggests, is typically to relate the something in question to what is, in a special sense, ‘either larger than or outside itself’ (Cooper 2006: 110). So to explain the meaning of a particular sequence of musical notes, for instance, one might try to show how it fits into the movement of the symphony to which it belongs. To explain the meaning of a certain rite – a priest’s consecration of the host, say – one might try to reveal the role it plays in a particular religious ceremony. As these examples indicate, the relation in question is not causal; Cooper suggests that it is normative, one of ‘appropriateness’. Thus if a sequence of musical notes has meaning, then it must make an appropriate contribution to the movement to which it belongs. If the priest’s actions are to have religious meaning, then they must cohere with, or make an appropriate contribution to, a set of religious teachings and practices.

Yet, once started, the holistic engine is hard to stop. To explain the meaning of a particular item, it is enough to show that it is appropriate, in Cooper’s sense, to some context. But one can always ask for an explanation of the meaning of that context. A sequence of musical notes might only have the meaning it has as part of a certain movement; however, further reflection might reveal that that movement only has the meaning *it* has as part of a symphony, which, in turn, owes *its* meaning to the role it plays in a wider form of life, one, amongst other things, in which people enjoy listening to music of a certain kind. If the priest’s consecration of the host is found to have meaning on account of the role it plays in the sacrament of the Eucharist, then further reflection might reveal that the Eucharist, for its part, has the particular meaning it has because of the role it plays in a wider, Christian form

of life. Reflecting on the meanings of X, and the contexts within which X has the meanings it does, one is eventually led to consider the total context within which anything has meaning. Cooper maintains that one is led to consider the all-encompassing background that Dilthey called 'Life', but which, following Wittgenstein, might be called a human form of life.

The notion of such an all-encompassing background might seem very high-flown; however, Cooper's account can be used to shed light on more mundane matters, including the ordinary, everyday meanings that people find in nature and natural things. For to see a natural thing as having a certain meaning – or, which for present purposes may be taken to be equivalent, to *attribute* a meaning to it or to *find* a meaning in it – is, very often, to see it as being 'appropriate' to some wider context. This part-whole relation can take many forms; hence natural things can have many different meanings and many different kinds of meaning (see further, Cooper 2006: 113-22). Consider a European robin (*Erithacus rubecula*), for instance. Like anything, it can be seen in a number of different ways – as prey for local cats, as a symbol of Christmas, as indicating a certain ecological habitat, as a gardening companion, as exemplifying human qualities such as verve or pluck – and so forth. There are different meanings in play here, to be sure, (instrumental, allusive, symptomatic, etc.) and I will not try to catalogue all of them. For now, it is enough to note that in considering what it means to 'take' the robin to be some sort of symbol or as exemplifying this or that quality one is considering its meanings. One is reflecting on the various ways that robins make sense to, or have significance for, people.

Furthermore, one can find meaning in the natural world as a whole, and not simply in individual natural things. While the people of one culture might regard the former as a kind of stop-off for their essentially non-natural souls, those of another might see it as a context within which they are, in some metaphysically substantive sense, at home. And as these examples indicate, explaining whatever meaning the natural world is taken to have will be a

matter of showing how it coheres with – or is appropriate to – the context provided by the form of life of the people for whom it has meaning. So to explain how the natural world as a whole was regarded by St Paul and his followers would be to reveal how the world of plants, animals and other earthly things fitted into the family of beliefs and practices that constituted the Pauline form of life. To explain what nature means in the context of Daoism would be to show how nature and natural things are ‘appropriate’ to the teachings and practices of that religion.

## **2. Virtue, vice and nature’s meanings**

The eponymous antihero of Kazantzakis’s *Zorba the Greek* is said to see ‘everything every day as if for the first time’ (1958: 56). However, most of us are not able to do this. We are disposed to see certain meanings in nature and natural things. That much is clear. But it is less clear how these dispositions should be evaluated. Is it in any sense of the phrase ‘a good thing’ to be disposed to see nature and natural things as having one meaning rather than another?

One answer would be that dispositions to find certain meanings in nature and natural things may be counted as ‘good’ when they tend to motivate people to act in ways that typically bring about good (or good enough) consequences. This is not an unreasonable suggestion: in many cases, one’s actions with respect to the natural world will indeed reflect the meanings one sees in it. Even so, my main concern in this paper is with the question of whether any of these dispositions to see meanings in nature and natural things are, in any sense, ‘good’ or ‘bad’ in themselves, irrespective of how they bear upon the production of good or bad states of affairs.



One answer to this question would be that it can be virtuous, an expression of a virtue of character, to be disposed to see natural things as having certain meanings – not necessarily an expression of *moral* virtue, but virtuous nonetheless. Yet the meaning of this statement is ambiguous. Is it being suggested that to possess a certain virtue, one *must* be disposed to see certain meanings in specifically natural things? Or is the suggestion merely that the virtue in question *can* be expressed in our seeing certain meanings in specifically natural things?

Begin by considering the first of these interpretations, the suggestion that to be virtuous one must be disposed to see specifically natural things as having certain meanings. This claim could be construed in a eudaimonistic way. It could be held that in order to flourish as a human being, one must possess certain character traits (virtues), of which some will amount to dispositions to find certain meanings in nature and natural things. For instance, it could be argued that one can only flourish if one is disposed to see the natural world – or, more plausibly, some part of it – as a home to which one belongs.

Note that the eudaimonist's claim is *not* that one can only flourish if one does in fact find certain meanings in nature and natural things. It is that one can only flourish if one is *disposed* to see nature and natural things as having certain meanings. Yet even this claim is hard to justify. It is no easy task to show that we cannot flourish unless we are disposed to find meaning in specifically *natural* things. For instance, it may be impossible to live a flourishing life unless one is disposed to feel in some sense at home in the place where one lives. But is there any reason to think that this must be a natural place, and not one of concrete, plastic and glass? On what grounds are we to criticise the life of a city-dweller who not only doesn't feel at home in nature but wouldn't feel at home in nature, were he ever to venture beyond the city-limits?<sup>6</sup>

We have so far found no reason to think that one must be disposed to find certain meanings in specifically natural things in order to flourish. How to respond? One strategy

would be to stick with, and try to defend, a eudaimonistic approach. But another would be to retain an aretaic focus while jettisoning the commitment to eudaimonism. An alternative response, then, would be to argue (1) that certain character traits qualify as virtues, not because they are constituents of flourishing, but for some other reason; and (2) that of those virtues, some amount to dispositions to find certain meanings in specifically natural things.

Yet (2) is difficult to justify. For example, it may be virtuous to be disposed to see certain sorts of things as worthy of wonder (see further, Hepburn 1984). What is more, it may be possible to justify the claim that this disposition is a virtue on non-eudaimonistic grounds. But if the disposition really is a virtue, then clearly it is one that can be exercised in relation to the human world (intricate marquetry, cathedrals, etc.), and not just striking natural objects such as snowflakes and glaciers. And the same would, on the face of it, seem to hold true of other virtues, such as humility. After all, one can be humbled by a glacier or a cathedral alike.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps these obstacles can be overcome. Maybe, for instance, it can be shown that a certain variety of humility – the antidote to ‘anthropocentric hubris’ – is a virtue and, moreover, one that can only be exercised in one’s relations with the natural world. In the following, however, no attempt will be made to prove that any virtues and vices can be defined as dispositions to see certain meanings in specifically natural things. I will not try to show that any virtues or vices are nature-focused in this sense. Instead, I will propose that just as certain virtues and vices can be exhibited in our tendencies to find certain meanings in things, so they can be exhibited in our dispositions to find certain meanings in *natural* things. More precisely, I will suggest that in interpreting nature and natural things one can exhibit vice in at least two ways: by seeing what might be described as the ‘wrong’ meanings in nature, and by failing to see the ‘right’ ones. These tendencies can, I argue, be counteracted through the exercise of two virtues – attention and receptivity, respectively.

### 3. Prejudice

In finding meaning in nature and natural things – as in anything – one can succumb to prejudice. This error can take various forms, of which one is well illustrated by the following extract from the Reverend Bosworth Smith's study, *Bird Life and Bird Lore*. (Bosworth Smith is relating the 'observations' of his friend, a Dr Blaikie.)

One day, in the month of August, he noticed a number of rooks approaching the trees of a small rookery in front of his house ... One of the rooks, flying about ten yards in front of the others, carried in its bill a twig, some eighteen inches long. It took up a prominent position on one of the trees, deposited the twig on the branch by its side, and then the business of the meeting began. First, one rook would talk in what seemed to be a set speech, and then they would all suddenly strike in, with a clamorous assent or dissent. Then, a second rook would address the meeting, whether to second the motion, or to propose an amendment to it, and his peroration would be received or objected to in like manner. But the most interesting thing about it all was that the twig-bearer seemed to be the president of the assembly. The twig must have been a badge of office, like the spear of the auctioneer at Rome, or his hammer in England. (Bosworth Smith 1905: 382-3; see further, Cocker 2008: 114-5)

While, like the equally fanciful Dr Blaikie, Bosworth Smith sees the rooks' behaviour as meaningful, he sees it as having meaning in relation to (or as being 'appropriate' to) a distinctively human context of meetings, speeches and the amendment of motions. And since his aim is to record how rooks actually behave (and not, say, to write a children's story), it is

clear that he is in error.<sup>8</sup> Blaikie and Bosworth Smith misinterpreted the rooks' behaviour; they saw the 'wrong' meanings in it.

Suppose that both men were prone to making such errors. Suppose that, unlike their more realistically-minded contemporaries, Blaikie and Bosworth Smith regularly anthropomorphised the animals they observed. If they were disposed to such flights of fancy, then this would, I think, reflect badly on their characters. It would indicate that their observations of nature and natural things were marred by a certain sort of prejudice.

'Prejudice', here, is used as a term of art. By it, I do not simply mean a disposition to 'misattribute' meanings to things, and I certainly do not wish to condemn all those who exercise their imaginations in attributing meaning to nature and natural things. So I do not mean to dismiss as prejudiced the works of great visionaries such as Samuel Palmer and Gerard Manley Hopkins. Instead, I am using the term 'prejudice' to gesture – albeit vaguely – towards a set of hermeneutic vices. So to be prejudiced, on this conception, is to be disposed, on account of one's character, to misinterpret the meanings of things, to find what might be described as the wrong meanings in them.

Prejudice can be exhibited in a wide variety of contexts, and not just in the studies of naturalists. For instance, it can manifest itself in attempts to find historical meanings in nature. Thus a certain kind of prejudice is evident in the words and actions of those who see the Highlands of Scotland as intimating an idyllic past in which simple country folk lived at one with wild nature. However, some of the best examples of what it means to exhibit prejudice in interpreting the natural world can be found in the literature of environmental aesthetics. A prominent theme in this literature has been the problem of evaluating the aesthetic appreciation of nature, identifying criteria by which to assess when such appreciation is 'appropriate' rather than 'inappropriate', 'serious' rather than 'trivial' (e.g., Saito [1998] 2004, Hepburn 1997). 'Inappropriate' or 'trivial' appreciation often involves

prejudice, which is to say that in many cases an inappropriate aesthetic response to a natural object will reflect the subject's tendency to 'misattribute' meanings to things, to find the wrong meanings in them. So when Marcia Muelder Eaton discusses the anthropomorphic sentimentality that was encouraged by Felix Salten's 1923 novel *Bambi* and the Disney movie of the same name, she is considering a form of prejudice. The same may be said of her discussion of the tendency to demonize parts of the natural world – to see wetlands as monster-infested swamps, for instance ([1998] 2004: 175-6). Other examples are provided by Ronald Moore's critical discussion of the aesthetic significance of imagination. When he condemns the sort of whimsy that would portray a river as a bookmark or a star as a good luck charm, or – more bizarrely still – a raven as a writing desk, his criticisms are targeted at certain manifestations of prejudice ([1999] 2004: 224; cf. Brady 2003: 168).

Iris Murdoch has much to say not only about prejudice, but about the virtue which provides its antidote. In 'The Idea of Perfection' she chooses to illustrate what it means to relinquish the one and exercise the other by means of the example of a mother, M, and her daughter-in-law, D. At first, Murdoch explains, M feels hostility towards D. The girl strikes her as being 'pert and familiar, insufficiently ceremonious, brusque, sometimes positively rude, always tiresomely juvenile'. Yet M is not a bad person, and after a while she comes to think that her first impressions of D might have been wrong. So the mother decides to 'look again' at what her daughter-in-law is like, and her impressions change. M discovers the girl to be 'not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on' (Murdoch 1971: 16-7). By giving 'sustained attention' to her daughter-in-law, M comes to see the young woman 'as she really is' (ibid.: 39, 36).

For our purposes, three features of Murdoch's account are worth noting. First, she follows Simone Weil in claiming that a tendency to fall prey to prejudice can be contrasted

with the virtue of ‘attention’ (ibid.: 17). Second, Murdoch does not seem to think that attending to X and coming to see it as it ‘really is’ involves somehow piercing the veil of human meanings to apprehend X as it is ‘in itself’ divorced from any reference to subjectivity. On the contrary, her discussion implies that to see something as it ‘really is’ is to see it as the bearer of certain meanings. (Hence she writes that the mother comes to see D *as* refreshingly simple, spontaneous, etc.) Third, Murdoch makes it clear that attention can be directed, not just at persons, but at other things too, including natural things (in ‘The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts’ (ibid.: 82) she gives the example of a kestrel). Indeed, I would suggest that the quality Murdoch calls attention is particularly well expressed in the best works of the literary genre that has come to be known as ‘nature writing’. So consider, by way of example, Mabey’s account of the loss of barn owls:

What is one to make of the decline of the [barn] owl ... a passing perhaps unmourned by the increasing numbers of people who have never seen one in the wild? Few birds are so dramatically beautiful, or can bring the exquisite delicacy of flight so close to us, or can look at us so penetratingly, eye to eye. But they mean more than that. Ecologists look to the condition of ‘top predators’ as a measure of how well the ecosystem on which they depend is working. The barn owl is a cultural indicator, too. We recognise, at a deep level, the meaning of that ritual crossing of the fields. It is a sacrament, a consecration of ‘good ground’ and the boundaries between light and dark, of the proper order of things. Just as the summer migrants stand for renewal, so the barn owl stands for continuity, and its passing leaves us that bit less grounded. (Mabey 2005: 137)

The passage testifies to the power of Mabey's imagination. But to use Emily Brady's phrase he is 'imagining well' and, unlike Blaikie and Bosworth Smith, he does not misread the meanings of the creature he is considering.<sup>9</sup> If he had chosen to write that barn owls consciously partake in any sort of ritual, then the passage would have rung hollow. Had he written that the owl's dusky search for voles, mice and shrews epitomises the 'cruelty' of predators, the meanings attributed would not have been 'right'. Yet Mabey's words ring true. To be sure, this alone is not enough to prove that the passage is the fruit of attention. After all, prejudiced interpreters can sometimes, through sheer luck for instance, get things right.<sup>10</sup> However, when Mabey's account of the owl is set in the context of his entire corpus, a clearer picture emerges. Whether he is writing about owls, otters or orchids, Mabey typically avoids the interpretative pitfalls into which prejudiced writers are prone to fall. He steers clear of sentimental anthropomorphism, for instance. Nor does he pine for an imaginary past, a golden age in which humans lived in peaceful harmony with nature. On the contrary, Mabey's various works testify, not just to the man's imaginative faculties, but to what Murdoch would have called his attention to nature (cf. Murdoch 1971: 40).

#### **4. Myopia**

For present purposes, the term 'myopia' may be taken to denote a set of dispositions to overlook meanings, including the meanings of nature and natural things. These dispositions can be exhibited in a number of different ways. Consider, first, the tendency to see nature and natural things as having meaning only in relation to the instrumental concerns of human beings. It is usual to say that someone who regards the natural world in this way tends to see natural things as being of merely instrumental value. Yet the point can also be made in terms of meaning. To regard the natural world as nothing more than a collection of resources for

our use is not merely to see it as having a particular kind of value. It is to take a peculiarly narrow, or myopic, view of its meanings.

A second example of myopia is provided by the modern tendency to speak, write and (presumably) think about nature and natural things in a ‘managerial’ way. It is not clear that all such approaches should be condemned as myopic. After all, some managers seek to take account of the various ‘cultural services’ that nature provides, and it is a moot point whether nature’s various meanings can be adequately expressed in such terms.<sup>11</sup> Even so, it is clear that some of the ways managers speak and write about environmental issues are poorly equipped to convey the semantic richness of the natural world. Take the style of language epitomised by talk of management solutions, added value, quantifiable targets and key performance indicators. The political, religious, mythic and historical significance of nature and natural things runs through such bland turns of phrase, as through a hole in a bucket. So although this sort of language has its uses, a devotion to it both reflects and fosters a certain sort of myopia.

Three clarifications. First, to be myopic is to be disposed to overlook meanings in a way that reflects badly on one’s character. It may indicate a general insensitivity to the meanings of things, but it is more likely to reflect a one-sided focus on certain sorts of meanings to the exclusion of others. Either way, like prejudice, myopia evinces vice. Second, the reason myopia evinces vice is not that it is wrong – i.e., prejudiced - to be disposed to see natural things as useful, for example, or as items to be managed. What is problematic is the tendency to see nature in these ways to the exclusion of others. So to be disposed to see natural things as useful is not necessarily to be myopic because such things *are* often useful. To be disposed to see natural places as items-to-be-managed or as the sites of famous historical events is not necessarily to be myopic because it is sometimes appropriate to regard them as such. To be myopic is, rather, to be disposed to see the natural world exclusively in



these terms – to regard the natural world as so much stuff, to be used however we see fit, or to take it to provide nothing more than a backdrop to the drama of human history (on the latter, see Saito [1998] 2004: 144-5). The error of myopia, then, is one of failing to be receptive to the range of meanings that nature and natural things have. It is therefore not so much a way of seeing nature's meanings as a way of *not* seeing them. However – and this is my third clarification – to overlook a meaning is not necessarily to be wholly unaware of it.<sup>12</sup> Even the most rabidly managerial manager will be aware that natural things have meanings that cannot be adequately expressed in terms of objectives, targets, key performance indicators and so forth. But he will no doubt play down the significance of these meanings – by dismissing them as 'merely subjective', for instance.<sup>13</sup>

The antidote to all forms of myopia is the sort of openness or receptivity that one finds expressed in the works of nature writers such as Mabey, J. A. Baker, Annie Dillard, Robert Macfarlane and Barry Lopez. The subject matter of these works is often similar to that of field guides, yet they do more than provide useful tips on identification. They often refer to the life sciences, in which their authors are typically well-versed; however, they do so without lapsing into scientism. Through their finely-weighted prose, the best nature writers manage to convey the materiality of natural things without lapsing into materialism, their aesthetic qualities without succumbing to a myopic aestheticism.

Mabey's *Beechcombings*, a set of reflections on the natural history and cultural significance of beech trees, provides a good example. The book is scientifically well-informed, yet, like other books of its genre, its primary focus is on nature's meanings. In the words of the author, it is about trees as 'status symbols, political icons, emblems of reparation, as investments, legacies, heritable goods', as 'emblems of continuity and peace in an unstable world', as 'dwelling places of gods... [m]etaphors for the state, for the human body, for life itself' (Mabey 2007: xi, x, 5). Mabey discusses the symbolism of tree-planting -

‘the penetration of the soil, the implantation of new life, the years of after-care and cossetting’ - even the remarkable myopia of the second Earl of Caernarvon, for whom trees were ‘an excrescence of the Earth, provided by God for the payment of debts’ (ibid.: 99).

Works like *Beechcombings* manage, ultimately, to locate natural things within the context which (following Dilthey) one might call ‘Life’. Through a well-turned phrase or a carefully deployed simile, the works of writers like Mabey, Dillard and Baker illuminate constellations of meaning; as Heidegger might have said, they ‘gather’ worlds.<sup>14</sup> And in so doing, they exemplify receptivity.

## **5. Anthropocentrism**

In trying to find meaning in the natural world, one can go wrong in all sorts of ways; one can make many different kinds of hermeneutical error. So far, I have identified two kinds of error, prejudice and myopia. I have suggested, moreover, that both can be interpreted in aretaic terms, that both indicate character flaws. Thus a virtuous person would, I have claimed, be attentive rather than prejudiced, and receptive rather than myopic.

The preceding sections have, I concede, provided nothing more than a sketch of an aretaic-hermeneutic account. An adequate account would need to provide much more detail and argument. It would need, for instance, to explain what vices fall into the categories of prejudice and myopia; it would need to justify the claims that attention and receptivity are virtues; and it would have to provide much more detail on the relations between these various traits and faculties such as imagination. Yet some will think it unlikely that any such account, however detailed, could prove illuminating. Some will wonder how an adequate conception of our relations with the nonhuman world could be based on a theory for which judgements of *character* – that is, *human* character – are primary.<sup>15</sup> Others will object to the focus on the

*meanings* of nature and natural things. After all – the sceptics will ask – when writers like Alan Holland (2012), Dan Firth (2008) and myself refer to the various meanings nature and natural things have for *us*, to what constituency are they referring? At the limit, such references might seem to indicate a disturbingly parochial concern, a preoccupation with what nature means for human beings. Thus some meaning-sceptics will worry that a focus on nature's meanings will lead us to overlook those parts of the natural world which, though valuable, mean very little or nothing to us. They might worry that a meaning-focused approach to environmental philosophy will have room for old oak trees and nightingales but little or none for the less charismatic actors in nature's show, such as mycelia or flatworms (see, e.g., Attfield 2005: 514-5; 1993: 148). And they might also worry that too much focus on questions of meaning will encourage us to overlook the alterity or 'otherness' of natural things. The sceptics will insist that there is more to such things – more, even, to oak trees and nightingales - than what they mean to us.

Is this charge of anthropocentrism warranted? Everything depends on how it is construed. It is true that all of the meanings we have so far considered have been 'human' in the formal and uninteresting sense that they have been meanings for human beings.<sup>16</sup> But it does not follow that all attempts to consider nature's meanings are anthropocentric in any sense that ought to perturb environmental thinkers. The works of Mabey, Lopez and Dillard focus on the various meanings nature has for us. But their anthropocentrism – if it may be so described – is entirely unlike the anthropocentrism one finds expressed in the works of a thinker such as Francis Bacon.

Be that as it may, it would, I think, be disturbingly anthropocentric to become *preoccupied* with the task of identifying the allusive, expressive, associative, etc. meanings of nature and natural things. Consider the notion, popular amongst certain religious communities in the Middle Ages, that the natural world is like a text – the 'Book of Nature' –

full of spiritual lessons for the aspiring Christian. This focus on nature's religious significance was, I would suggest, myopic. But it is also likely to have encouraged the trait Lynn White (1947: 433) calls 'human egoism', an anthropocentric blindness to the independent reality of nature. In support of this claim, White considers the archaic belief that pelicans feed their young on their own blood, a behaviour that was thought to symbolise Christ giving life to humankind. As White speculates:

In such a world there was no thought of hiding behind a clump of reeds actually to observe the habits of a pelican. There would have been no point to it. Once one had grasped the spiritual meaning of the pelican, one lost interest in individual pelicans. (1947: 424-5)

In the context of this sort of anthropocentrism, it is nature's meanings that are all important. Nature itself is of very little interest.

This sort of religious-centred anthropocentrism is rarer nowadays, yet it still resurfaces from time to time. It is there in the notion, propounded by some sections of the Christian Right in the U.S., that the cinema documentary *March of the Penguins* is a moral and religious fable, not just proof of Intelligent Design, but also a lesson on the importance of monogamy, self-sacrifice, fidelity and family life.<sup>17</sup> Critics were quick to point out the flaws in this case, pointing, amongst other things, to Roy and Silo, the resident pair of 'gay' penguins in New York's Central Park, as well as to a number of distinctly un-American features of penguin ethology (Mynott 2009: 43-4). The critics' general response, then, was that those who saw *March of the Penguins* as a moral and religious fable were primarily concerned, not with the birds, but with their own political and religious agendas.

Some will say that the best remedy for this sort of anthropocentrism is to learn more science. They will argue that learning more about ecology, for instance, can kindle an interest in what natural things are like in themselves, apart from the various meanings us humans find in them. Others will contend that science is too anthropocentric an enterprise to perform any such function. Thus Stan Godlovitch argues that both the methods and the results of science reflect our distinctly human interests in ‘theorizing and experimentation, description and measurement’, and that for this reason, amongst others, ‘[s]cientific activity is not necessarily any less anthropocentric than any other human enterprise’ ([1994] 2004: 117-8). In his view, taking up a truly non-anthropocentric attitude requires a more radical transformation: the ‘dissolution of the human perspective’ and the adoption of a ‘state of appreciative incomprehension’ before nature’s otherness (ibid.: 120-3).

Such remedies might prove effective. Reading the works of the biologist Edward O. Wilson might be enough to reveal to one anthropocentrist that there is more to natural things than what they mean to us humans. Another might find the antidote to her ‘human egoism’ in the radical de-centring to which Godlovitch refers. Yet in order to begin the process of overcoming this sort of anthropocentrism, it will often be enough simply to pay more *attention* to natural things: not just to look and see what they are like, but to listen to them, smell them, touch them and taste them. For attending to them in these ways can reveal what too often goes unnoticed: that there is more to nature and natural things than what they mean to us.<sup>18</sup> Thus attention can counteract not just anthropomorphic sentimentalism, superstition, etc., but also the anthropocentric disposition to overlook nature’s independence from human concerns (see further, Saito [1998] 2004, AUTHOR 2009). And in this way it can militate against the tendency, no less marked in our modern consumerist times than in the Middle Ages, to look to nature and natural things and see nothing more than reflections of ourselves.

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Also AUTHOR 2006, 2009

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Ruskin [1856] 1912: 510; White 1947: 433; Mabey 2010: 2.

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed account, see AUTHOR 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Or at least brand new laptop computers, etc. are ‘out’. A natural history book or television programme could conceivably focus on how artefacts crack, rust, become clogged with dirt and colonised by fungi, and eventually – so to speak – return to nature. See further, Vogel 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Although I focus on Cooper’s account of meaning, I do so merely because it sheds light on how the term ‘meaning’, and its cognates, tends to be used in ordinary discourse. Nothing I say below presupposes the truth of Cooper’s account.

<sup>5</sup> ‘[I]f you want to understand the use of the word “meaning”, look for what are called “explanations of meaning”’ (Wittgenstein [1953] 1991: §560). See Cooper 2003: 28; also Cooper 2006: 110.



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<sup>6</sup> Raimond Gaita, for one, considers it ‘arrogant folly’ to suppose that ‘an interest of any kind in nature or animals is essential to a full development of one’s humanity’ (2003: 157-8).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Thomas Hill Jr.’s claim that it is ‘logically possible for a person to be properly humble even though he view[s] all nonsentient nature as a resource’ ([1983] 2005: 54).

<sup>8</sup> Bosworth Smith’s book is entitled *Bird Life and Bird Lore*. Even so, it is clear from its context that the account of the rooks is offered, not as an example of folklore, but as an accurate record of how the birds behave.

<sup>9</sup> See Brady 2003: 158-61. Some readers may object that Mabey’s account is every bit as fanciful as Bosworth Smith’s. Nonetheless, even they must concede that ‘imagining well’ must be distinguished from ‘succumbing to prejudice’, even if there is some dispute about where the line between the two should be drawn.

<sup>10</sup> Conversely, attentive interpreters can occasionally get things wrong. After all, attentive people are not constantly attentive. Moreover, it is possible to misinterpret something even if one is paying attention to it. For instance, a thoroughly attentive birdwatcher might simply be unaware that the bird he is viewing is a normal-sized goshawk rather than a giant sparrowhawk (cf. Carlson [1979] 2004 on the role of knowledge in aesthetic appreciation).

<sup>11</sup> Although I will not argue the point here, my own view is that too much emphasis on cultural *services* both reflects and fosters the ‘instrumentalist’ myopia mentioned above.

<sup>12</sup> This, to be sure, is where the analogy between meaning-myopia and literal short-sightedness breaks down. Someone who is literally short-sighted does not see distant objects clearly and yet somehow edit them out of her field of vision. She doesn’t see them clearly at all.

<sup>13</sup> Thus a myopic tendency to dismiss talk of nature’s meanings can be bolstered by an appeal to scientism. For according to scientism, any true description of the world is capable, in principle, of being entirely expressed in the terms of natural science – in terms of causal

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relations, for example, but not in terms of normative ones such as Cooper's 'appropriateness'. Thus for advocates of scientism talk of meanings must either be dismissed as referring to nothing more than the subjective states of meaning-apprehenders or interpreted in naturalistic terms. (On the latter, see the discussion in Grice 1957 of how talk of what something 'means' can often be cashed out in causal or statistical terms.)

<sup>14</sup> On 'gathering', see Heidegger's essay 'The Thing' (1971: 165-86).

<sup>15</sup> In AUTHOR 2006, I argue that such worries are groundless.

<sup>16</sup> I do not wish to deny that nature might have meaning for some nonhuman beings. This is not, however, a possibility I explore here.

<sup>17</sup> *March of the Penguins* is a French documentary film focusing on the lives of emperor penguins. The film was not only a huge box-office success; it also won the 2005 Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature.

<sup>18</sup> And not just natural things. As Merleau-Ponty once noted, attending to *any* thing, artefacts included, can afford one a glimpse of the 'non-human element' which 'lies hidden' within it. Hence it is not the case that anthropocentrism can only be exhibited in one's dealings with specifically natural things. See further, Merleau-Ponty 1962: 322; cf. Vogel 2003.